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ABSTRACT

This guide to writing material that will be read by new readers focuses on making the material readable, relevant, and effective. The first section of the guide gives an overview of this process, and addresses the following aspects of writing for new readers: (1) determining the audience and its interests; (2) elements of effective written communication; (3) choosing appropriate subjects; (4) forms of writing (including folk tales or biographies as alternatives to expository writing); (5) use of illustrations; and (6) using a controlled vocabulary. The second section of the guide provides more specific suggestions for readable writing, including: choosing a subject; gathering and evaluating material; seeing words as tools for a specific purpose; structuring sentences and paragraphs; making the reading interesting; writing an outline; giving the writing unity, coherence, and emphasis; and structuring the text. Exercises for writing practice are provided. The third section of the guide discusses news writing, including what makes news, the structure of a news report, the use of language in the "news style," and preparing news copy. Suggestions for avoiding common errors are made, and writing exercises are also provided. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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WRITING FOR NEW READERS

Selections From A Writers' Manual

By:

Marion Van Horn

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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C O N T E N T S

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2. Readable Writing

3. News Writing

All articles begin with blue inserts.

WRITING FOR THE NEW READING PUBLIC

By:

Marion Van Horne

WRITING FOR THE NEW READING PUBLIC

FROM A WRITER'S MANUAL BY MARION VAN HORNE
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Millions of adults around the world are becoming new readers through literacy classes conducted by governments or private agencies. An even larger number of people who know how to read a little are finding that modern ways of working and living require more education than the bare mastery of the ABC's. For these reasons the new reading public is more significant than a generation ago.

People cannot become and remain literate without reading books. The kind of books they read determines whether they go on reading, for help or pleasure, or whether they give it up as too difficult for them. There is ample evidence from field research and experiments to show that reading materials for "new" readers must be written and presented to meet the particular needs of this audience.

Before a writer sits down to write an article, story, or booklet for new readers, he must ask himself: Who will read this material? Reading matter that would be suitable for a man living in the industrial area of southern Brazil would not fit the man who has lived all his life in a Brazilian village.

Similarly, a woman who is interested in making clothes for herself and her children is not likely to want to read books on how to produce more rice. People are interested most in reading about things that make a real difference in their personal lives.

Probably the main question the reader asks is: What has all this got to do with me? He should be able to get his answer quickly. If he is to continue reading with interest, he must feel that what the book tells is related in some way to his own needs and his own problems. It must show him how he can have a better life.

If malaria is his problem, the booklet should indicate how malaria can affect him. The story should make the reader wonder about his health without frightening him. It must make him realize that it is important to him to know more about malaria and to take steps to avoid getting the disease.

PLANNING A BOOKLET FOR THE NEW READING PUBLIC

If you were planning a booklet on pure water, for example, you would need to ask yourself the following questions:

1. What group of people needs to have this information (men, women, farmers, fishermen, laborers, villagers, city dwellers, general public)?

2. Does this group of people need to learn:

   a. that clear water is not necessarily pure water?

   b. that small living organisms they cannot see may be in the water and that these can make them sick?

   c. that by boiling the water and keeping it in clean containers they can be sure their drinking water is pure?

   d. that by keeping dirt out of their water they can guard against impurities?

3. What can this group do to avoid water contamination?

   a. Why should they do something?

   b. When should they do it?

   c. How should they do it?

After you, as a writer, see clearly what the reader needs to find in such a booklet, you face other questions:

1. How can I present this information most effectively?

2. What kind of a plot will develop these points into an interesting story? Would a factual article accomplish the purpose better?

3. What other information is available for these readers? What pamphlets, articles, or books might I list to help the reader who wants to know more?

WRITING FOR THE NEW READER

Writing for new literates is expressing adult ideas in the most direct and effective way. It is not like writing for children.

Because this reader is an adult and not a child, he presents different problems for the writer. Although his mind and experience are adult, he needs simply written material. He has a large speaking vocabulary. He has responsibilities and personal difficulties. If he is a farmer, he is likely to be a conservative with deep-rooted convictions. Usually he has little leisure time. If he is an older person, he frequently has physical disabilities, such as impaired sight or hearing.

The writer must write in a style that will appeal to new readers and avoid at the same time any "primerizing," which may antagonize the better reader. The following paragraphs from the National Tuberculosis Association pamphlet "Your Baby" show how this can be achieved:

Your baby should be given a complete physical examination by your physician as soon after birth as possible and at regular times after that. A good plan is to let the doctor see the baby every month until the child is one year old and every two months until he is two years old.

At his office or in a well-baby clinic, the doctor will check on your baby's growth. He will explain any special care that is needed. He will also tell you what to do about the baby's food, clothes, sleep, exercise, bathing, and toilet training. These things are very important to your baby's health now and in the future.

HOW TO WRITE EFFECTIVELY

1. Use concrete words and phrases.

The new literate thinks in concrete terms rather than in abstractions. The poet Horace always thought this way when he did his writing. He did not speak of love but of a particular girl; not of the austere life of old Italy but of sons carrying firewood; not of tranquility but of sheep at a river bank without a breath of wind.

2. Write short sentences.

The new reader has difficulty in recognizing words and phrases. For him to be able to read to the end of a line is a triumph. One thought in one sentence and one sentence in one line is a good rule to follow.

3. Use well-known words.

A word with which a person has had no experience has no meaning for him. The "right" word is the word the reader expects to find. Use it! Why say "terminate" when you can say "end" or "cooperate" when you mean "work together?" In most languages a vocabulary of 3,000 words make up 95 percent of the words found in printed matter. This gives the writer for new readers a basis for selecting words.

4. Use short words.

In English, short words are better than long ones. The eye can take them in at a glance.

5. Cut out unnecessary words.

Every extra word is an obstacle for the reader.

6. Repeat words and phrases.

New words should be repeated frequently. To assist the reader to read in phrases, it is good to repeat phrases as well as words. For example:

One evening we were playing chess.
Suddenly I noticed a faint spot on
Maung Htoo's face.
I exclaimed, "Dear Maung Htoo,
you have a red spot on your cheek."
He looked in the mirror.
He agreed, "Yes there is a spot."

(BURMA)

7. Use the "Echo Technique."

A word or a phrase repeats the thought in the previous sentence and leads the reader on into the story. For example:

This is the story of a man who
lived to be 120. The man's
name was Juan. Juan lived
with his wife in Mexico.
Juan's wife was called Maria.

8. Use active verbs.

In English and in many other languages but not in all, active verbs are strongest. Action verbs such as running, laughing, crying are words that can be visualized as they are read.

9. Watch abrupt changes of tense.

When you have to change tense, prepare the reader for it with words such as "tomorrow," "yesterday," "later."

10. Anticipate your reader's difficulties.

Do not belittle his intelligence. Find out how much he knows and build on that. A piece of writing can be extremely readable and still pass over the head of the man who reads it. Consider a sentence like: "He was as mad as Hamlet." This is a short, readable sentence. But if your reader has never heard of Hamlet, it will have no meaning for him.

11. Define unfamiliar subjects.

Explain technical words and add new information step by step or in small fragments.

12. Make your writing interesting.

Vary the form of your sentences. Put in a question now and then.

13. Write paragraphs thoughtfully.

Paragraphs provide natural resting places for the reader to stop and think over what he has just read.

SUBJECTS FOR THE NEW READING PUBLIC

Writing is successful only when people read what is written and understand it. Because people are interested in reading about things that concern them, subject matter may be as wide as life itself. The following list of subjects was suggested by members of a writing workshop in Haiti.

Religion
Family life
  Marriage
  In-law relations
  Births
  Funerals
Nutrition
  Diets
  Recipes
How to stop quarrels
Home remedies
Dangers of opium and other drugs
Farming
  Techniques
  Seeds
  Fertilizers
  Livestock diseases
Weather
How to increase family income
Village industries
Water supply, good drinking water
An ideal village
Market prices
Sports
Gambling
Stories people like to hear
Proverbs
Poems and songs the people love
Folklore
Morals, ethics
National classics

FORMS OF WRITING

A story is effective when the purpose of the booklet is to arouse interest or to create an attitude. When the writer wants to stir the emotions of the reader, he can often do this more easily in a story. If, however, the topic needs a clear presentation of facts, an article may accomplish the purpose better. When the reader is expected to take action on what he has just read, the writer should help him see what to do, why it must be done, and how to do it.

Sometimes folk tales can reveal best the important aspects of history, food, geography, and social and religious customs. Frequently biographies of outstanding poets, composers, scientists, and national and religious leaders will give the reader a sense of pride in the achievements of his fellow men.

How-to-do-it articles on a very simple level are popular with the new reader. Such subjects as "How to grow rice," "How to care for a baby," and "How to dig a well" are subjects that lend themselves to such treatment.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Pictures attract attention. An author of a book for the new reading audience should plan to use drawings or photographs as a basic part of his book.

Illustrations help tell the story. The reader can get the central idea just by glancing at the pages. If the pictures arouse interest, he will want to read the printed material.

In planning the illustrations for a particular book it is important to decide what kind of illustrations will be suitable to use with the text. Decorative drawings are appropriate for folk tales.

For the new reader, simple line drawings and photographs are usually more effective than detailed drawings. Frequently they can replace words, explain the text, or demonstrate a how-to-do-it process. They are useful, also, in supplementing material that may be unfamiliar to the reader. For one who has never seen a lion, a skyscraper, or a banyan tree, a picture or a drawing can be the next best thing to firsthand acquaintance. Equally important, illustrations add emotional emphasis by attracting and increasing the reader's interest.

The reader must have some experience in common with what he sees in the illustrations if they are to have meaning for him. Drawings must emphasize significant points and should not be cluttered with unnecessary lines or halftones.

More space should be allowed for pictures in materials for beginning readers than in those for advanced readers. In factual material, it is often necessary to allow one-third to one-half of the total space for illustrations. In planning a book, illustrations are as important as the text. They should never be considered as a secondary or luxury item.

Never use a picture without a caption. Tests have shown that captions get immeasurably higher reading than conventional blocks of text. Captions can tell what is happening in the illustrations and so help to reinforce the text. Portions of any illustration that need more emphasis may be pointed out by captions. The caption supplements the illustration just as the illustration supplements the text.

The use of color in illustrations is very important, but while color attracts the reader, a little goes a long way. The cover of a book should be gay and attractive but it should not be gaudy.

WRITING WITH A CONTROLLED VOCABULARY

The writer for the new reading public must carefully select the words he uses if new readers are to constantly learn new words. The use of a controlled vocabulary is one way to reach such a goal. Writing with a controlled vocabulary means using chiefly the words that appear in a list of familiar words developed with a particular reading group in mind. In such a vocabulary, the familiarity of the reader with the idea expressed by a word is more important than its length or newness to the reader.

If such a vocabulary has been developed in your language, you can select from it the words most appropriate for writing the first book for a new reader. In succeeding books, you will add other words, thus helping the reader increase his reading vocabulary gradually.

If no such list exists in your country, you might compile one by listing the 500 words that most adults in your country would understand. From such a master or total list, you could select words to use in the book you are writing. You should hold yourself rigidly to this list without, of course, making your writing seem lifeless or artificial. You may be surprised how much you can say by using only the words with which the reader is most familiar.

In each succeeding book, you will introduce new words from the master list, adding approximately one new word for every thirty familiar ones used in the first book. In later books approximately one new word may be used for every twenty used previously. A new word should appear at least five times in a booklet in which the reader finds it for the first time. By building up gradually to a vocabulary of the 2500 words used most frequently, the reader will be able to read with ease any simply written material.

A variation of the vocabulary control method has proved successful in some parts of Africa. In the first three books, both vocabulary and content are controlled. In the fourth book, which is usually fables or stories, the vocabulary is not controlled since the reader is already familiar with the story.

Practice in Writing

1. Recall a story you have heard your grandfather or some older person tell. Write this story in 200 words for a group of new readers.

2. Take three booklets for new literates and evaluate them.

3. Taking into consideration your needs, prepare an outline of a booklet on one of the following subjects: health, sanitation, nutrition, citizenship.

4. Write a short story--1000 to 1200 words--about some event in the history of your country, the readers adults with three or more years of schooling.

5. Write a familiar story or folk tale in 500 words or less for a new reader.

READABLE WRITING

By:

Marion Van Horne

READABLE WRITING

The best place for any writer to start is with his readers. If he does not know them well, he may end up merely talking to himself.

In most cases a writer can only know a few of his readers. He must discover the characteristics, interests, and needs of the others through reading, observation, conversation, and research.

Every writer is interested in learning facts about the age, sex, and educational background of his readers. He wants to know whether they live in the city or a village area and if they are new or advanced readers. Everything he can find out about them will help him produce an article, story, or book that will attract their attention and hold their interest. When a writer knows his readers, he can select an interesting subject and work out the best way to present it.

Whenever we write a letter, we do these two things unconsciously. We know what will interest the person to whom we are writing. We write about different subjects to different people. We may tell a child and an adult the same thing, but we use different words and different styles of writing. The better we know the person, the more interesting our letter will be.

A writer respects his readers no matter how young they may be or how limited their schooling. A sensitive writer never talks down to readers. Nor does he try to impress them by using big, unusual words when smaller, more familiar ones will convey his meaning as well. He wins confidence when readers feel that he knows them and their interests as well as the subject he is presenting.

CHOOSING A SUBJECT

A subject does not need to be sensational or unusual to attract readers. Any human problem or conflict may give an author an idea for a good plot for a story. Something a writer has seen or experienced often suggests a subject. Frequently some aspect of health or sports, music or education, politics or religion becomes the basis for an interesting magazine article.

After a writer has chosen a subject, he may find it too big to handle adequately in one article or short story. When this happens, he limits his subject by selecting only its most interesting phases. He learns quickly that it is better to develop a few ideas clearly than to confuse the reader with several.

When an editor requests an article on a particular subject, it is usually one with which the writer is already familiar. Often he is able to write about it from personal experience. Sometimes he supplements his own knowledge with research.

Once a writer agrees to write on an unfamiliar subject, he must be willing to do extensive research. Usually his interest in the subject grows as he learns more about it.

GATHERING AND EVALUATING MATERIAL

Gathering material is assembling information. It may come from many different sources: observation, interviews, reading, and research. The imaginative writer is always collecting material and trying to discover how to present familiar facts in a different or unusual way. Often he finds he has more material on a given subject than he can use in any one piece of writing. When this happens, he selects what is best suited for his immediate purpose. The rest he files away for future use.

The writer must always evaluate his material. If he is basing his article on personal experiences, he selects only those that are striking and unusual. When he uses material already in print, he must always ask himself:

1. Is this statement true?

2. Is the source from which I took it reliable? Is it up-to-date?

3. Does this material give a well-balanced view of the subject? What other information do I need?

No reputable writer copies material from another writer. When he draws heavily on someone else's material, he secures permission to use it and acknowledges his indebtedness. Any direct quotation is accompanied by information regarding the author, the title of the publication in which the quotation appeared, publisher, and date of publication. Permission to use the quotation is arranged with the author or publisher.

WORDS ARE TOOLS

Words are tools. A carpenter uses a plane, a chisel, a saw to shape a piece of furniture. A writer uses words, sentences, and paragraphs to compose an article or a story. Skill in using the tools of the trade makes the difference between an ordinary product and a superior one.

The writer's task is to communicate ideas to his readers with as little loss in meaning as possible. He uses words to create an image, to express a thought, to give a fact, to arouse a feeling.

Written material communicates ideas most effectively when the writer uses words the readers will recognize. New ideas will be clear only if they are presented in familiar words. When a writer must use a new or unusual word, he should define it or make its meaning clear by the way he uses it.

Every writer must learn how to use words precisely. Whenever he talks with people, reads, or listens to the radio, he watches for new words. Jotting them down in a notebook helps to remind him to refer to a dictionary. Looking up new words, repeating them aloud, and using them immediately enlarges his vocabulary. Collecting words can become an interesting and profitable hobby.

A writer learns to use words precisely by writing something every day and by scrutinizing each word he has written, asking:

1. Does this word say exactly what I want to say?

2. What other word would give the reader the idea more clearly, the fact more accurately?

3. Have I used this word with the exact meaning it has today?

He may go farther and look at the piece of writing as a whole, asking:

1. Have I used the same word too many times?

2. Where can I change a word to give my writing variety?

3. Are my words lively? Do they suggest action?

4. What word or words are too general to say anything specific to the reader?

Tired Words

Certain words like certain people tend to be overworked. They are tired. They deserve a rest. Whenever you are tempted to use a trite, hackneyed expression, try to find another word of nearly the same meaning. A writer says that a book is "interesting" when he really means it is stimulating, stirring, informative, fascinating, engrossing, timely, or unusual. He may show how a girl is "interesting" by saying she is clever, charming, alert, or talented. There are many colorful words a writer can use to tell the reader a child is cute, a house nice, or a hostess lovely. He will improve his writing when he uses the word that tells his reader most.

Unnecessary Words

Writers need to guard against using several words when one or two will serve as well. "The speaker is of the opinion that..." says no more than "The speaker thinks that..." "The speaker ended his talk to the audience with the following statement..." says only that "The speaker concluded with..." Examples of similar uses of unnecessary words are "along the lines of" for "like"; "in order to" for "to"; and "with reference to" for "about."

A writer must become merciless in cutting out unnecessary, trite, tired, empty words. They do little but add length to his article. They cost money to print and often bore or confuse the reader. Most writing is improved by cutting.

Every word has a job to do. The writer's task is to make sure that every word does its job efficiently and vividly.

Big Words

Big words are often words that do not fit. They are like clothing that is too big. Some writers use big words to impress their readers or to cover up their own lack of knowledge.

Unfamiliar words and vague statements discourage readers. The more experience a writer has, the more he realizes how important it is to express his ideas in short, familiar words.

A bishop, speaking to a group of conference delegates, advised them to use simple words whenever they wrote resolutions or spoke at civic or church affairs. He concluded his address by saying:

> "The big things in life have little names, such as life and death, peace and war, dawn and night, night and day, hope and home and love."

Verbs Are Key Words

When verbs are well chosen, they put action into writing. They give vigor and life to sentences, supplying a center around which other words revolve.

A student from Angola recently commented, "In my country people from generation to generation have found messages with deep meaning for their lives in popular sayings or proverbs." This is true in other countries. A study of four African proverbs show that active verbs are their key words:

> *A roaring lion kills no game.*
> *Chattering does not cook the rice.*
> *Catch the halter rope and it will lead to the donkey.*
> *The one-eyed man doesn't thank God until he sees a blind man.*

In English, verbs in the active voice are livelier than verbs in the passive voice. For example "Green Lake will always be remembered by me" comes to life when changed to "I shall always remember Green Lake."

In one vivid paragraph, a workshop student at Green Lake expressed strong feeling about the importance of words:

For me words can change the world. Words are more precious than gold or diamonds if they are disciplined and well used. Nothing, just nothing, will stand on earth longer than good books in whatever language they may be written.

(THAILAND)

SENTENCES

An ideal sentence expresses only one thought. Sentences are difficult to read and understand when they have too many words or when they express more than one idea.

Short sentences help readers see quickly what the writer had in mind. They also show how his thoughts are related. Too many short sentences, however, make writing sound choppy or childish.

Long sentences tend to become boring or confusing. Usually, though, they have joints in their construction where they can be broken into two or more sentences. These joints come where words like "and" and "but" appear.

When sentences are all about the same length, reading may be monotonous. Variety in sentence length helps hold the reader's interest. One study revealed that the average length of sentences in five popular American magazines was 18 words.

Varying the form of sentences improves writing. Changing the position of an adjective, adverb, phrase, or clause in its relation to subject and main verb often gives life to a slow moving sentence. These versions of the same sentence show some possible variations in position of adverbs and clauses:

1. When the wind shifted, all the boats hurriedly headed for the open sea.

2. All the boats hurriedly headed for the open sea when the wind shifted.

3. All the boats headed for the open sea hurriedly when the wind shifted.

PARAGRAPHS

A paragraph is a group of related sentences. When a writer is unable to express the central idea in one sentence, he may be attempting to include too many ideas in one paragraph.

One author says:

I write every paragraph four times
once to get my meaning down,
once to put in everything I left out,
once to take out everything that seems unnecessary,
and once to make the whole thing sound as if I had only just thought of it.

-- Margery Allingham

A paragraph always starts on a new line and, as a rule, it is indented a few spaces. Thus each paragraph stands apart from the one preceding and the one following. A paragraph is a signal that a new idea is coming. The reader adjusts his attention accordingly. A paragraph is well written when the reader moves with increasing interest from one paragraph to the next.

BEFORE WRITING

While a writer is gathering material, he is thinking how he can write about the subject in an interesting way. Before he begins to write, he must decide upon his main points and see the details that go with each. Then he writes an outline to help him present his material in some logical order. All this preparation helps him when he does the actual writing. Hours spent in preparing a good outline may save days of writing and rewriting.

Every writer faces possible ways to begin. He may start with the general idea he is going to develop and follow this with supporting facts. This method is often used in articles on scientific and technical subjects. The other possibility is to begin with some specific fact or situation and then present material that builds up to the general idea he wishes to present. This is the more usual procedure in popular and informal writing.

Whichever plan the author follows, his finished writing should be like a series of waves of interesting height and force, each more powerful than the one before. The body and conclusion rise above the introduction and fulfill the promises it made.

WRITING AN OUTLINE

There are two kinds of outlines. A "Topic Outline" has main headings and subheadings written in single words or brief phrases numbered consecutively. A "Sentence Outline" has headings and subheadings written in complete sentences. Here is an example of the form for any outline:

A GUIDE TO WRITING

I. First Organize and Outline Material

A. Make Preliminary Content Selection

1. Determine purpose and scope
2. Choose a working title
3. Make a preliminary list of topics

B. Conduct Necessary Research

1. Use personal experience
2. Get information from authorities
3. Study published and written materials

a. Use up-to-date publications
b. Consult reliable sources

C. Make a Guiding Outline

1. Select useful topics
2. Arrange topics into a writing map

II. Make the Manuscript a Coherent Unit

A. Interest Readers with a Good Beginning

B. Make the Writing Flow Smoothly

1. Bridge gaps with good transitions
2. Use relationship-showing devices
3. Write paragraphs readers can understand
4. Introduce new ideas with topic sentences
5. Mark end of thoughts with summary sentences

C. Plan the Coherence and Unity of Manuscript

III. Write the First Draft

A. Help the Readers Understand What You Write

1. Find out what readers already know
2. Decide how much material to give the readers
3. Interest the reader: talk directly to him

B. Write in a Lively, Readable Style

1. Use familiar and concrete words
2. Choose action verbs
3. Write effective sentences

    a. Write shorter sentences
    b. Steer clear of inversions
    c. Cut down parenthetical expressions
    d. Use short, choppy sentences sparingly

4. Personalize: Get reader into act

C. Do a thorough job of writing first draft

D. Read, revise, and rewrite

UNITY, COHERENCE, EMPHASIS

Good writing is clear thinking in written form. All good writing has *unity, coherence, and emphasis.* Writing has *unity* when every thought is related to the author's central idea and purpose. *Coherence* is achieved when the writer states ideas in ways that seem logical to the reader. *Emphasis* points up particular ideas the writer wishes to stress.

Unity

Unity results when the writer uses all his material to achieve a specific purpose. To prove a point, explain a situation, or present certain facts, he selects only the material related to his purpose and discards anything that makes no contribution to his goal.

A sentence has unity when it expresses one thought, a paragraph when it develops one central idea, an article or story when it achieves one main purpose.

Coherence

Coherence calls for the continuous, orderly development of a subject. The writer understands how his thoughts are related to one another, but he must find ways to guide the reader from one idea to the next.

When a writer is hard at work putting his thoughts on paper, it is difficult to arrange his points in a consecutive, logical order. Two things can help a writer overcome this difficulty.

First, he can work out a detailed outline before he starts to write. Occasional references to such an outline will help him proceed in a way that will seem logical to the reader.

Second, he can read his first draft thoughtfully to see if he has presented his ideas consistently.

Before reading a manuscript critically, it is good practice to lay it aside for a short time. After a couple of days, it is easier to make a more objective judgment. Questions a writer may ask himself as he checks on coherence include:

1. Is the relationship between my sentences clear?
2. Can the reader go from paragraph to paragraph without any confusion?
3. Is there any point at which the reader needs more information?
4. Will my presentation seem logical and consistent to the reader, whether he agrees with my point of view or not?

Emphasis

Some ideas are more important than others. The writer emphasizes these by repeating significant words or expressing the idea a second time in different words. Frequently he lists the points he wishes to stress. This gives them prominence on the printed page.

Some writers use mechanical devices, such as underlining, italics, capitals, quotation marks, exclamation points, or bold type, to stress certain words or passages. The competent writer does not need such devices to make up for deficiency in style or content.

THE MAIN DIVISIONS OF WRITING

No writer has a captive audience. He cannot make another person read. Every piece of writing needs an interesting introduction. This should be followed by a main body of facts and a brief, forceful conclusion.

The Introduction

The opening paragraphs give the reader an indication of what is coming. They lead him into the subject gradually. An incident with human interest, a quotation from a well-known person, or a striking statement usually gains immediate attention.

The author of an article on "People's Movements and Possibilities" compared the current national situation in Sarawak with a huge tidal wave. He began his article:

Seated in a dug-out in the narrow channel through which the river flows to the sea, you feel the tropical sun beating mercilessly on your straw hat. Its hot rays slip behind your dark glasses. In the distance you hear a dull roar rumbling through the jungle. It seems to bounce off the river banks.

The sound grows louder, then still louder. Then the tidal wave comes in its fury. The high wall of water is racing toward you.

With an alarming calm, the driver turns the stern of the dug-out straight into the wave, and you're off! You are riding atop the crest of the wave. There's no escape. You're in it until the wave spends its violent force and again becomes part of the parent tide.

To try to escape would be certain destruction for the boat and, perhaps, for the driver and yourself. This is the ride you've been waiting for. It's here and you must make the best of it.

(SARAWAK)

When a writer has difficulty composing his first sentences, he leaves his introduction to write later. Experienced writers continue writing until they have said what they wish to say. They usually find it easier to take out irrelevant or surplus material than to expand a topic they have written too briefly. When they have completed their first draft, they go back and look critically at the introduction to see if it will interest readers. Sometimes they find that it would be better to begin with the second or third paragraph. More often they write an entirely new introduction.

The Body

The principal part of any piece of writing is called its body. In a long article the body has three or more sections. Each is a separate unit and covers one main division of the subject. A good outline helps a writer see these main divisions and the details that belong naturally in each. Writing becomes manageable and more enjoyable when the writer knows exactly what he wants to say and has a plan for developing his material.

Thoughts in the body of an article are like threads in a tapestry. The writer weaves these threads into a pattern. His purpose ties them together. The pattern is revealed when he comes to a strong conclusion.

The Conclusion

A good final paragraph gives a finishing touch to any piece of writing. It rounds out the subject and leaves the reader with the exact impression the writer wants him to have. It satisfies the reader and

makes him glad that he finished reading the article or story. Since people tend to remember the last thing they read or hear, the conclusion often makes the most lasting impression.

Summarizing the main points is always an effective way to conclude a piece of writing. Such a conclusion gives the writer one more chance to say something to his readers and to clarify any points that need additional emphasis.

A well-written conclusion fulfills any promise or completes any idea expressed in the introduction.

Practice in Writing

1. List all the words, phrases, and figures of speech that you can think of which might be used instead of the word "nice."

2. From your magazine reading, copy sentences containing each of the following. Underline the words and give the source of sentences selected.

   a. Action verbs
   b. Powerful nouns
   c. Adjectives of power
   d. Adverbs of power

3. Write a one-paragraph description of a storm using words that will appeal to the reader's five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching).

4. Select five paragraphs from any book or article and write the central thought of each in one sentence.

5. Write two or more paragraphs expressing your thoughts after looking at a tree, a flower, a book, a flag, a child, or an old man. Do not say what the object is, but write so the reader will know what you are describing.

6. Compress the statements below into one word:

   .....at that time
   .....on one occasion
   .....a small number of
   .....went on to say
   .....in the near future
   .....at the present time
   .....once in a great while
   .....a large number of
   .....tendered his resignation
   .....taken to jail and locked up
   .....was able to make his escape

.....brought to a sudden halt
.....united in holy matrimony
.....the time at which

7. Edit all unnecessary words from the expressions below:

    in the city of Madras
    cost the sum of 5 rupees
    was an oblong shape
    throughout the entire day
    cannot be possible
    perhaps it may happen
    old traditions of the past
    during the course of the day
    talk on the subject of charity
    a baby boy was born
    was engaged in studying
    finished up
    reported to the effect that
    made out of iron

8. Write out of your own experience, a paragraph of action that will arouse some emotional reaction in the reader. State the emotion.

9. Outline an editorial for a new magazine.

10. Write a classified ad offering for sale a vest-pocket transistor radio.

NEWS WRITING

By:

Marion Van Horne

NEWS WRITING

News is new information presented in clear, factual, and interesting writing. When the writer and editor do their jobs properly, readers get accurate, up-to-date information. This helps them to make up their own minds about the significance of what they have read.

Terms used for written news differ. In some countries it is called a "news report," in others a "news story" or "news article," or, when quite brief, a "news item."

WHAT MAKES NEWS?

Events make news. Names make news. What people do and say or what happens to them gives the reporter something to write. The more unusual the occurrence, the more interest it arouses. The more quickly a report reaches the public, the greater attention it receives.

News writers need to understand the nature of the news and the ways in which it is constantly shifting. News values change in relationship to the following elements:

1. Timeliness

The more recent the event, the more interest it arouses. Every good news report is up-to-date in every detail. News is sometimes defined as "history in a hurry."

2. Nearness

News is not really news until it is local. The nearer an event is to the reader, the more important it seems to him. A story about a child hit by a truck in Delhi, India, may get a half-column in the Delhi Hindustan Times, a short paragraph in a Madras paper, and no mention at all in Bangkok.

People like to read about themselves, the members of their own family, their friends, and their neighbors. They are interested in things that happen near where they live and concern people they know. They want to know, too, how these events will affect their lives.

Today the speed of communication and widespread travel are bringing people closer together. This new nearness increases the reader's interest in world news. Anything that happens to people anywhere may affect him and his family.

3. Prominence

Items about well-known persons have news value. Glancing at the reports of births, marriages, or deaths in newspapers shows that one name makes the headlines, another rates a column, while still another gets only a few lines on an inside or back page. The event may be the same; the name of the individual or family makes the difference. The better known any person is, the more his activities and opinions interest others.

4. Unusualness

The unusual incident is always news. The alert news writer is always looking for a new emphasis in a news story that will attract attention, arouse curiosity, or stir excitement. There is an old statement that says that it is not news if a dog bites a man, but it is news if a man bites a dog.

5. Significance

The importance of an event as news depends upon how many people it affects and to what extent and for how long. If its results are minor or merely temporary, the event may not be worth reporting at all. If the effects are far-reaching, the event will receive major attention and prominent space. The length of news stories always varies according to the significance of the event.

6. Human Interest

News items have human interest when they give the reader glimpses of real life. Most readers have a genuine interest in anything unusual that happens to a child, a teen-ager, or an older person. Such stories entertain, arouse concern, or stir sympathy.

7. Universality

Some themes have universal appeal. News reports are read by people everywhere when they deal with such themes as food, shelter, health, sex, education, employment, politics, or religion. The threat of war or the promise of a better standard of living will win the attention of readers in any country.

8. Conflict and Suspense

Conflict between persons, political parties, or nations always has news value. The element of suspense, which makes readers wonder what will happen next, leads to sustained interest.

WRITING A NEWS REPORT

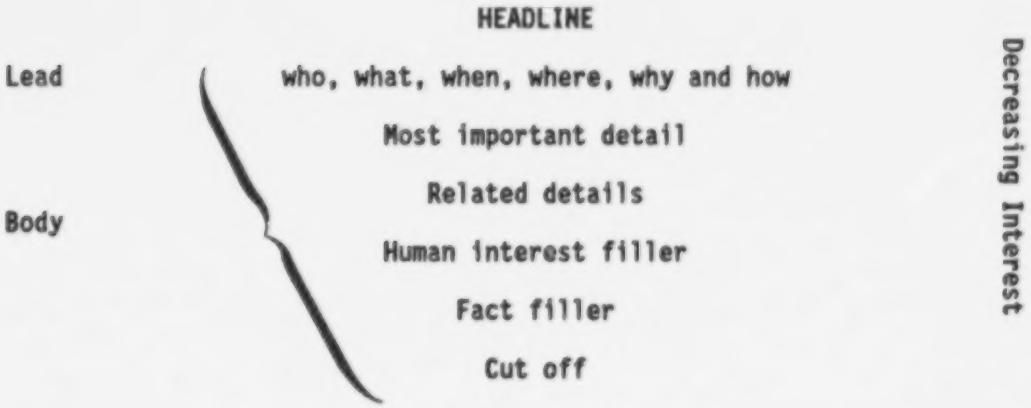
A straight news report tells exactly what happened. The news writer's task is to write an unbiased, impersonal, and accurate report. He never tells why he thinks an event occurred nor expresses his personal reactions toward the individuals involved. He sticks to the facts, using third person pronouns, such as "he," "she," and "they." He seldom, if ever, uses the words "I" or "you," except in reporting the words of someone else.

Expression of personal opinion is the privilege of the editor or critic, not the news writer. This is true whether the report is about a meeting, a wedding, a death, a speech, a fire, an election, a church convention, or a fashion show.

The world situation is so complicated today that it is often necessary for the news writer to provide the reader with some background information. He does this by writing an interpretive news report in which he traces the chain of events that led up to the current happening. Sometimes he indicates possible future developments.

A reporter frequently finds he can get all the information he needs at the scene of the event. If he finds it necessary to give some authority for his facts, he can always quote the opinion of an expert or he can tell the reactions of bystanders. He uses such words as "according to Dr. Charles Russell, the surgeon at Robert Hospital," or "in the opinion of the owner of the store that was robbed" with a direct or indirect quotation to indicate from whom he secured the information.

NEWS STORY DIAGRAM



NEWS STYLE

A news report begins with an introduction, which is called in some countries the "intro," in others the "lead." This introduction quickly gives the reader the most important facts. The body of the report, which follows, develops and expands these facts. A news report has no formal

ending. No summary of what has been said is needed. The major facts are brought together in the introduction.

The News Report Diagram on this page illustrates how a news report moves from a striking headline to the lead, then to the body of the report with its added details, incidents of human interest, and, finally, to less important facts. Without repeating minor details, a good news story may be told four times in the same report--in the headline, in the "intro," in the body, and, perhaps, in an accompanying photograph and its caption. Usually the editor writes the headline and picture caption.

Every news writer knows how limited the space is in any newspaper. He writes his report so the editor can "cut off" or drop the last paragraph, or two or three paragraphs, if necessary, without losing some essential facts the reader should know. One way to test whether a news report is well written is to see if, beginning at the end, you can remove paragraph after paragraph up to the lead and still have the essential facts. If the facts are all there in the lead, the writer has passed successfully the "cut-off test."

Occasionally a skilled news writer finds he can write his report as interestingly, fairly, accurately, and briefly in some other way. If, for example, he is writing the story of some local celebration, he may relate the incidents in the order in which they occurred. He may begin with a quote or a very brief interest catching incident. He may even, on occasion, spring a surprise ending.

CHECK LIST FOR A NEWS REPORT

1. Does the report give the most important facts in order of their importance?

2. Is the report factual, and does it give credit for source of facts?

3. Are paragraphs and sentences short?

4. Is the report free from personal comment by the writer and first person pronouns?

5. Is the first word of each paragraph different?

6. Are the sentences varied in their grammatical construction or monotonous because they are too much alike?

7. Could the last paragraph or two be cut without losing important information?

8. Does the vocabulary and style reflect the "spirit" of the event reported?

9. Is the report free from errors in spelling and grammar?

10. Is the report typed, double spaced, on one side of the paper with adequate margins?

Adapted from
News in Print, p. 14

THE INTRODUCTION

The most important part of a news story is the "intro" or "lead." This gives the main facts in one or two short paragraphs. News writers take great care in composing this introduction because they know they are competing for reader attention. If the lead arouses sufficient interest, readers will read the entire story. If it does not, they may skip it completely. The reader who has time to read only a few lines appreciates a lead that gives the major facts in as few words as possible.

Five W's and an H

Newsmen are indebted to Rudyard Kipling, an English poet and novelist, for a jungle that tells them how to write good leads:

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew;)
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

A good lead answers six questions:

1. What happened?
2. Why did it happen?
3. When did it happen?
4. How did it happen?
5. Where did it happen?
6. Who was involved?

The first step in writing a news report is assembling the answers to these questions. The second is organizing them in order of their importance, and the third is writing the introduction or lead.

Types of Leads

1. A Summary

Writers of news use this lead most frequently. It simply summarizes the facts in an orderly way:

Ten thousand blankets were landed in Algeria on November 27 by chartered cargo plane after an emergency flight from Logan Air Field in Boston.

2. A Short Statement

A short statement may begin a news report effectively:

> *Delegates from thirty-one countries attended the First International Christian Writers' Seminar at Green Lake, Wisconsin, from June 16 to August 18, 1962.*

3. A Direct Quotation

An attention-getting quotation as a lead gives life to a news report:

> *"I had the time of my life," said Mr. Habib Said, reporting on his recent trip to the United States.*

4. A Question

A provocative question is a good way to arouse interest and to put the reader in an inquisitive mood. The writer starts something the moment he asks a question. The reader wants to continue reading to find the answer. One reporter began his news story about a steel worker who avoided injury when faced with a dangerous situation with this question:

> *If you had to balance yourself on a thirty-foot scaffold and a bee suddenly came buzzing at your head, what would you do?*

Other Ways to Vary the Lead

1. An Infinitive Form of the Verb

This type of lead is useful whenever the writer wishes to tell why an event occurred:

> *To teach basic skills of writing and to train delegates to conduct writers' workshops in their own countries were the two main purposes of the first International Christian Writers' Seminar at Green Lake.*

2. A Preposition

The use of a prepositional phrase is one way to vary the lead:

> *Without the professional help of a drama critic, it will be impossible to continue the monthly Dramatic Review.*

3. A Participle -- Verbal Adjective

The writer emphasizes action by the use of a participle:

> *Flying to Cairo, Mr. Luke Chen, pilot for Pan American Airways, had a heart attack.*

4. A Conditional Clause

Sometimes the uncertainty of an event or a decision to be made suggests the use of a conditional clause:

> *If at least fifteen students sign up for the course in writing radio scripts, the course will be offered in our workshop for writers next October.*

The type and construction of the lead depend upon the nature of the news story. Every lead should catch the reader's attention and prepare him for what follows.

CHECK LIST FOR LEADS

1. Does the first word or phrase tell the most important fact in the report?
2. Is the who told with full name and a descriptive title or phrase for each person named?
3. Is the what or what happened complete?
4. Are the questions when and where answered in the lead but subordinated to more important information?
5. Are the how and why elements given a prominent place if they apply to the story?
6. Has the lead been broken into two or more sentences or paragraphs to make reading easier?
7. Does the lead really catch the "spirit" of the event?
8. Is the lead free from errors of spelling or grammar?
9. Have all the names been checked for correct spelling?

Adapted from
Check List for Leads,
News in Print, p. 24

THE BODY

The body of a news report develops and expands the facts mentioned in the lead.

Since news writing must be concise as well as clear and accurate, the choice of words is important. The writer should be able to give a reason for every word he uses. He soon learns that one word is better than two or three.

It is essential to use words that readers understand. All technical words should be defined. The news writer is writing to give information, not to impress readers.

The difference between an obscure statement and one any reader can understand is illustrated by a sentence in a report once handed to President Roosevelt. The sentence read: "We are trying to construct an all-inclusive society." When the edited report finally appeared in print, the sentence had been changed to read: "We are going to make a country where nobody will be left out."

Use of Verbs

Verbs give movement; they portray action. The effective reporter uses verbs in their most emphatic form. In English, verbs used in the active voice give life to a news report. In some languages, the passive voice is more emphatic.

Use of Pronouns

The news writer's purpose determines the pronouns he uses. "He," "she," "they," and other third person pronouns tell a news story best.

Words to Cut

Adjectives play a minor role in news writing. The facts, not the reporter, tell the reader that the bridge was radiantly beautiful, the conference exciting, inspiring, or disappointing, the act courageous, the girl beautiful, or the party enjoyable. Few adjectives and adverbs are needed in a well-written news report.

Combinations of words used so often that they have lost their originality or freshness weaken a news story. Presenting the "keys to our fair city" may have its place in an oration welcoming a guest but not in a news report of his visit. Overflowery language of any kind is out of place. Inexperienced writers are tempted to use general statements and poetic phrases when facts are limited. An experienced reporter knows that no story should be longer than the available facts justify.

Sentences and Paragraphs

The reporter's sentences should be short, simple, and direct. He strings his facts together in a tight and compact fashion. Full stops or periods mark the end of each sentence. These appear more frequently than commas or semicolons.

Paragraphs are usually brief and each one develops one main idea. The lead may have one paragraph or two or three short ones.

IN SUMMARY

Clear sentences and well-organized paragraphs always characterize a well-written news report.

The writer of news learns to write concisely and accurately.

He uses the right word in the right place and discards words and phrases that do not give the reader information.

PREPARING NEWS COPY

A news report should be written on standard size paper, one side, typed double or triple space with wide margins on side and at top and bottom. Copy on the first sheet should begin one-third down, leaving room for the editor to write in the heading. When typing is impossible, legible handwriting is essential, and an uncrowded page makes editing and setting into type easier and quicker.

In the upper right-hand corner of the first page, the full name of the writer should appear with a brief statement of the subject, date, and approximate number of words in the article.

The sheets should be numbered consecutively, and at the bottom of each sheet, when other sheets follow, the word "more" should be clearly typed or written.

News reporters fold their completed manuscripts horizontally and never staple sheets together.

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR WRITERS OF NEWS

1. Do keep in mind and respect the power of the printed word for good or for evil.

2. Do feel responsible to do your best work in every news report you write.

3. Do read your own and other newspapers and magazines regularly, thoroughly, and critically.

4. Do think first--then write. Try putting the main facts into one sentence. This will help you see what is most important.

5. Do remember that accuracy, brevity, and fairness are the marks of a good news story.

6. Do remember, as you write, the date or hour when your news will be read. Choose the tense of your verbs with this time in mind.

7. Do be specific. "A big crowd" tells much less than "50,000 people."

8. Do use verbs that most vividly suggest action. In English, for example, "David hit the ball" is much more lively than "The ball was hit by David."

9. Do describe the event in short phrases and sentences.

10. Do keep paragraphs short.

11. Do vary the grammatical construction of your sentences and paragraphs.

12. Do introduce clearly every person you mention.

13. Do leave your own opinions out of the report.

14. Don't use unnecessary words. Every word that goes into print costs money.

15. Don't repeat over and over again the same word or phrase.

16. Don't fail to give all the facts your readers need to come to a reasonable conclusion.

17. Don't begin a sentence with numbers unless you write them out in words.

18. Don't assume too much information on the part of your readers, but never underestimate their intelligence or "write down" to them.

19. Don't use the names of persons or initials of organizations without giving the name in full the first time it appears.

20. Don't use technical terms, foreign words, legal expressions, or other unfamiliar words unless you have space to define them.

21. Don't use words that will seem unnatural or affected to your readers. Use familiar language.

22. Don't reveal sources of information when facts have been given to you confidentially.

Practice in Writing

1. Clip from a newspaper the reports that illustrate the eight elements that give news value. Choose the three that you think will appeal to the largest number of readers and tell why.

2. Write 100-150 words to tell a new reader what news is and why it is important to read news regularly.

3. Write 250-300 words to advise a college student how to become a good news writer.

4. Clip from a newspaper and discuss one or more items that illustrate each of the following points:

   a. News of an event the writer might have seen.
   b. News secured through one or more interviews.
   c. News written from printed sources of information.

5. Examine five news stories in a current paper and decide where the lead of each ends and the body of the report begins.

6. Study the same five news stories to see if each one answers the five "W's" and the "H" a reader might ask. If you find some of these six points are missing, decide how and where they might be added.

7. Clip a news report from a newspaper or magazine and see if it could pass the "cut-off" test. Then decide what you would omit if it was necessary to cut six lines.

8. Arrange the following facts in order of their importance to readers of news:

   Charles Anderson, 18 years old
   Blind since birth
   Swimming instructor at the Y.M.C.A.
   Went swimming yesterday afternoon at the West River beach
   Shouts of bystanders told him a small boy was drowning
   Hear cries of Frank Wilson, 10 years old, son of Mr. and Mrs. James Wilson
   Guided by the cries he swam to Frank's assistance
   Persons on shore shouted directions to him
   Reached Frank as boy was going down
   Brought him to shore where boy was given first aid and taken to his home.

9. Study the leads of three news reports carefully, listing the facts in each, and then answer these questions:

   a. Was any "W" or the "H" omitted? If so, what important information was lacking?

   b. Was the most important "W" placed first? If not, how would you improve the lead so that it would arouse more interest?

c. How many words does each lead have? Find out the average length by adding the words in all three leads and dividing by three.

10. Write for your local newspaper a news report about a writer's workshop or a meeting you attended recently. After it is completed, test the lead, by using the "Check List for Leads"--then rewrite the lead if you see a way to improve it.

11. Using the facts about the rescue of Frank Wilson by Charles Henderson, as given above, write a news story.

12. Interview another member of the workshop or a person in the community to get details about some event he participated in. Write up the interview in the form of a news item for your town, school, or church paper.

13. Apply the tests in the "Check List for a News Report" to a report of an interview that you have written and rewrite it at points where you find you can improve it.

14. Examine and edit a news report you have written noting:

a. Number of words in the lead
b. Facts given in lead
c. Details the body adds
d. Words not needed
e. Words repeated several times
f. Number of active verbs
g. Number of adjectives
h. Over-flowery expressions
i. General expressions over-used in writing
j. Pronouns used
k. Incorrect grammar or spelling.

15. Review the "Do's" and "Don'ts" on page 31, checking points where you need practice in order to improve your writing.

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